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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study of advanced senior high students' writing abilities indicates that, over a three-year period, students exhibit significantly improved writing skills. Follow a continuous program of writing enhancement, graduating seniors exit the system with reasonable or better than reasonable skills in essay organization, sentence formation, word usage, capitalization, and punctuation. A feature analysis provides additional evidence of changed performance. As seniors, students write longer essays that contain lengthier sentences and a greater number of paragraphs. Data are presented in table form. (Author)

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A Comparison of Tenth and Twelfth Grade Students' Essay Writing Performance

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Running Head: A Comparison of Essay Writing Performance

Abstract

A longitudinal study of advanced senior high students' writing abilities indicates that, over a three-year period, students exhibit significantly improved writing skills. Following a continuous program of writing enhancement, graduating seniors exit the system with reasonable or better than reasonable skills in essay organization, sentence formation, word usage, capitalization and punctuation. A feature analysis provides additional evidence of changed performance. As seniors, students write longer essays that contain lengthier sentences and a greater number of paragraphs.

A Comparison of Tenth and Twelfth Grade Students' Essay Writing Performance

Over a three-year instructional period, how do the writing skills of secondary students change? This question was addressed in a longitudinal study that involved collection of pre-writing samples from a group of entering tenth grade students in fall 1984 and post-samples from the same students as they exited twelfth grade in spring 1987. The writing samples were scored using a focused holistic scoring model so that students' entry and exit scores could be compared in four specific domains and overall. As a follow-up, an abbreviated feature analysis was performed which examined differences in students' word and sentence fluency.

The purpose of this article is to present and discuss results of a descriptive investigation of senior high students' writing abilities. Florida state law requires that all senior high school students receive instruction in composition skills. Thus, students in the study were enrolled in a formal writing enhancement program throughout their high school experience. Program developers were interested in discovering the role that instruction played in the maturation of these writers.

Because longitudinal studies of writing progress are rarely conducted (Shaughnessy, 1980), it is not possible to judge these findings against some standard of normative growth. Nor, since all Florida students are enrolled in a formal writing program, is it

possible to measure the performance of a non-instructed group of students. Previous studies of yearly progress have concluded that high school students do not necessarily improve their writing skills from one year to the next (Turner, 1984; Herrell, Turner & Kaney-Kelley, 1985; Daniels & Zemelman, 1985; Herrell & Turner, 1986). The extent of progress over a multi-year period was a question of intense concern for local professionals.

METHOD

The study was conducted in two phases. First, a group of secondary English teachers scored a large number of writing samples which had been written on two separate occasions by senior high school students. Then, the writing samples were subjected to a feature analysis in which an evaluator and an assistant counted and charted the number of words, sentences and paragraphs in each essay. For purposes of clarity, the Phase I procedures and data will be presented first, followed by the Phase II explanation and results.

Phase I

Papers for the study were collected from sophomore and senior high school students in Hillsborough County (FL). In fall 1984, writing samples were collected from 400 sophomore students representing all four English course levels (i.e., basic, regular, honors, advance placement) from all high schools in the district. In May 1987, some of these same students submitted writing samples as they graduated from the system. All paper pairs were used in several district studies that examined

pairs of essays were randomly selected from the scored papers. Basic and regular course students had written paragraphs on both occasions. Honors and Advanced Placement students had written essays on both occasions. Thus, advanced students who remained in the district for grades ten through twelve constituted the subjects for this study.

Instruments

All essay topics and instructions were developed by English teachers at several high schools in the district. Efforts were made to have topics reflect the types of assignments given in classes. Prior to their use, topics were field tested with a small number of secondary students. On each occasion, students were given the choice of writing on one of two or three topics. Directions and topics were given on one sheet and provided to each student along with a second sheet on which identifying information and the student response were to be written. Approximately 45 minutes or one class period was allotted for completing the writing task.

Scoring Model

A procedure for scoring the writing samples was devised in 1983 by a representative group of district English teachers who identified a set of 17 traits to be evaluated in the essay. An external consultant and nationally recognized expert in scoring writing samples grouped the traits under four domains: Composing, Sentence Formation, Usage, and Mechanics. Then, these domains were defined with special tailoring for the traits under examination. When the domains had been defined in

terms of the identified trait, a four-point scale was developed for each domain. These domain score scales allowed each paper to receive four independent scores -- one for each domain -- and to be summed for an overall score.

The domain definitions and score scales were formatted, along with background material and general information about scoring procedures, into a scoring manual. This document was the central instrument used to train raters and guide the scoring session.

Pre-scoring

For two days in June 1987, a team of expert judges (three classroom teachers of English) and the consultant established standards by which students' writing samples would be scored. Judges scored, discussed, and rescored until they reached agreement about the final ratings of a number of papers. These pre-scored papers then were used to stabilize the score scale throughout subsequent training and scoring activities. Some pre-scored papers became Anchor Papers. Another set of pre-scored papers became Training Papers and were used to teach raters to score in concert with pre-scoring standards. Still another set of pre-scored papers became Check Papers. These papers were used periodically throughout scoring as a check to ensure that raters did not drift away from the standards set by the expert judges.

Scoring

Training and scoring activities for both phases of the study were conducted in June 1987. In Phase I, eight raters, representative of high school English teachers throughout the district scored the essays.

Each scoring round was conducted in exactly the same manner. Each rater was given a scoring packet containing a set of papers to be read independently. When raters had finished scoring the entire packet of papers, the packet was collected and the rater was given another packet of papers to score. This procedure continued until all papers had been scored by two raters. The two scores for each domain were then compared. When any pair of scores was found to be discrepant by more than one value, the discrepant domain was identified for resolution. Resolution readings were conducted exactly as other readings had been, except that only the discrepant domain was scored by the resolution rater.

In each domain the final score for a paper was determined by averaging the scores that were assigned by the two raters. For example, if upon first and second readings in Phase I, a paper received scores of 2 and 3 in Composing, the final Phase I Composing score would have been 2.5. In like manner, the sum score was derived. Each rater's scores for the four domains were summed. Then, the two sum scores were averaged to obtain a final overall score for each paper. If the paper required a resolution reading in any domain, the score assigned by the resolution rater was considered the final one for that domain.

Data Analysis and Results

To determine whether the grade groups differed in their writing skills, scores were subjected to an analysis using the student's t test from the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, tenth edition (SPSS-X). As shown in table 1 differences existed between the two

groups' scores in all of the domain categories and overall.

Insert Table 1 about here

At the end of three years of instruction, students in advanced classes show substantial improvement in their overall writing skills and in all four domains. As a group, advanced students enter the sophomore year with writing skills below the reasonable level in all areas except Sentence Formation. They exit the twelfth grade with significantly better skills -- at or above the reasonable level. Particularly skilled performance is exhibited in the Sentence Formation domain with the most dramatic improvement occurring in the Composing domain.

Phase II

After completing the scoring and analysis for the first phase of the study, the 50 paper pairs were reorganized into pre- and post-groups. Then, for each essay, the evaluator and an assistant counted the number of words, sentences and paragraphs. These fluency counts were entered into a computer data file and, again using the student's t test, comparisons were made of pre- and post-performance.

Table 2, which shows the comparative results, indicates that as graduating seniors, students write significantly more words, sentences and paragraphs than they do as entering sophomores. Furthermore, as twelfth graders, students write significantly longer sentences. No differences are observed in paragraph length. Seemingly, then, older students use a greater number of words to construct longer sentences and

create additional paragraphs. These findings shed additional light on those of the focused holistic portion of the study where senior students improve in, among other skills, essay organization and sentence formation.

Insert Table 2 about here

DISCUSSION

Results of a longitudinal study of advanced senior high students' writing abilities indicates that, over a multi-year period, students exhibit significantly improved writing skills. Following a continuous program of writing enhancement, graduating seniors exit the system with reasonable or better than reasonable skills in essay organization, sentence formation, word usage, capitalization and punctuation. A feature analysis provides additional evidence of changed performance in showing that senior students write longer essays that contain lengthier sentences and a greater number of paragraphs.

Certainly, the present study is limited in design and should not be regarded as definitive. Nonetheless, it contains valuable information for teachers and policy makers responsible for writing skills instruction. It provides evidence that substantial growth can occur in four essential domains of the writing process. Also, it contributes important data regarding the average length of sophomore and senior students' essay compositions, including the average number of words, sentences and paragraphs. Interestingly, in their study of the writing characteristics of college freshmen, Stewart and Leaman (1983) found

that given a 50-minute writing task, students produce an average of 320 words -- about 40 more than these high school seniors and 120 more than these same students as high school sophomores. Such findings can be useful in comparing the performance of similar types of students and in setting goals for programs and individuals. Investigations of these basic forms of growth continue to be research priorities.

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Table 1. Domain Comparison of 1984 to 1987 Essay Scores (N = 50 matched pairs)

Trait	Average Score On: 1984 Sample (Standard Deviation)	1987 Sample (Standard Deviation)	T value
Composing	2.35 (.60)	2.99 (.96)	- 6.23*
Sentence Formation	3.11 (.54)	3.41 (.53)	- 3.68*
Usage	2.80 (.42)	3.07 (.49)	- 3.69*
Mechanics	2.95 (.59)	3.22 (.58)	- 2.96*
SUM	11.20 (1.39)	12.72 (1.54)	- 6.48*

*$p. \leq .001$

Score Scale for Each Domain

4 = skilled performance
3 = reasonable performance
2 = minimal performance
1 = weak performance

Table 2. Selected Aspects of Essay Performance of Tenth and Twelfth Grade Students (N = 50 matched pairs)

	Mean	Standard Deviation	T value
WORDS			
Grade 10	202.04	58.93	- 5.10**
Grade 12	277.56	86.53	
SENTENCES			
Grade 10	12.86	3.57	- 3.65**
Grade 12	16.32	5.67	
PARAGRAPHS			
Grade 10	3.36	1.52	- 1.89*
Grade 12	3.84	.95	
WORDS/SENTENCE			
Grade 10	16.10	4.05	- 1.84*
Grade 12	17.42	3.06	
WORDS/PARAGRAPH			
Grade 10	75.94	45.49	.23
Grade 12	74.30	21.62	
SENTENCES/PARAGRAPH			
Grade 10	4.83	2.93	1.14
Grade 12	4.32	1.25	

* $p \leq .10$

** $p \leq .001$